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Proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001

Temporary assistance for meetings: requirements for 2000-2001

Note by the Secretary-General

Summary

The present note has been issued in response to the request made by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001 that the Secretary-General provide further justification to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session for the reductions in temporary assistance for meetings shown in section 2 of the proposed programme budget for the next biennium.

Estimated conference-servicing workloads for the biennium 2000-2001 project a level of demand for conference services broadly equivalent to the servicing requirements addressed in the current biennium. On the assumption that the services provided in 1998-1999 have been adequate to support the Organization's conference and meetings activities during the period, it is proposed that the staffing of conference services at Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna, both permanent and temporary, be maintained during the next biennium at its current levels. Consequently, actual expenditure for temporary assistance for meetings in 1998-1999 was considered a sound basis to estimate requirements for the biennium 2000-2001.

Perceived problems in the delivery of conference services are being addressed through managerial efforts to enhance quality control and utilization of capacity. Some shortcomings have causes that are outside the area of responsibility of conference services. While increased levels of temporary assistance could help overcome those problems, this possible approach would have to be considered in relation to relevant provisions of General Assembly resolutions and to concerns about cost-efficiency.

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I. Background

1. In chapter II, paragraph I.39, of its first report[1] on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001,[2] the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions noted that in section 2, General Assembly affairs and conference services, of the proposed programme budget for the next biennium the requirements for temporary assistance for meetings showed reductions compared with the level of resources approved for the biennium 1998-1999. The Advisory Committee was of the view that the proposed estimates and the additional information given to it did not contain sufficient justification for the proposed reductions. Bearing in mind the level and quality of services to be provided, the Committee requested the Secretary-General to provide further justification to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session. The Committee stated further[3] that the proposed reductions in temporary assistance for meetings needed to be evaluated in the light of apparent and persistent instances of problems concerning the level and quality of a number of services, such as translation, interpretation and timely publication of official records.

2. The reductions relating to temporary assistance for meetings of conference services at Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna noted by the Advisory Committee, as proposed in paragraphs 2.48 (a) ($2,110,400), 2.73 ($1,669,100) and 2.120 ($1,058,000) of section 2 of the proposed programme budget, add up to $4,873,500 before recosting. It should be noted with respect to the proposed reduction in Geneva ($1,669,100) that it represents a net reduction in temporary assistance for meetings in the amount of $1,832,700, offset in part by an increase under overtime in the amount of $163,600. With respect to Vienna, it should be noted that a further reduction was proposed in paragraph 2.126 of that section in the amount of $425,100. Thus, the overall proposed decrease in resources for temporary assistance for meetings amounts to $5,426,200, broken down as follows: New York $2,110,400, Geneva $1,832,700 and Vienna (under the full budget) $1,483,100.

II. Calculation of requirements for temporary assistance for meetings

3. As indicated in paragraph 2.5 of section 2, given the degree of uncertainty inherent in the timing and volume of the demand for conference services, the capacity of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services is programmed below the foreseeable levels required and supplemented as necessary through the use of temporary assistance for meetings. It follows that the requirement for temporary assistance will depend on two factors, the level of the established or permanent servicing capacity and the projected level and timing of overall demand.

4. According to the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, the established servicing capacity in all three duty stations would remain at its current levels. As may be seen from the tables of significant workload indicators in section 2, the demand for conference services in 2000-2001 is expected to remain at the level estimated for 1998-1999, which is generally somewhat lower than the average level experienced during the period from 1992 to 1997.

5. In those circumstances, it seemed advisable to base the requirements for temporary assistance for meetings for the next biennium on actual expenditures incurred for this item in 1998-1999, which are currently projected at approximately $39 million for the three duty stations. This is consistent with the budgetary approach outlined in paragraph 2.8 of section 2, which states that the overall level of the servicing workload under the section was estimated for the biennium 2000-2001 as broadly equivalent to the volume of services to be provided for the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and all other United Nations organs and special meetings during the biennium 1998-1999.

6. In that connection, it should be noted that although there are four special sessions of the General Assembly and a number of other major meetings scheduled or planned for the next biennium, past experience and the information available at present do not suggest that those meetings would raise the overall demand for conference services substantially over the levels of 1998-1999. It should be pointed out, however, that there is still a considerable degree of uncertainty regarding the format of some of the meetings and the services they will require.

7. Some managerial actions taken over the past few years have helped to reduce actual expenditures on temporary assistance for meetings without impairing servicing capacity. One such action was the priority assigned to the recruitment of local freelance language staff, with the resulting savings in travel and daily subsistence expenses. Another is the closer alignment of capacity and demand, through improved workload forecasting and judicious overprogramming. Yet another, in the translation area, is the heavy reliance on contractual arrangements as an alternative to more costly in-house translation by temporary staff. Remote translation

by duty stations with available capacity to relieve others labouring under peak demand has also contributed to reducing the overall need for temporary assistance.

III. Temporary assistance levels vis-à-vis perceived shortcomings in service delivery

8. In its observations on the issue the Advisory Committee linked the level of resources for temporary assistance to problems concerning the quality and availability of interpretation and documentation services.

9. As regards interpretation, efforts are being made to ensure quality by recruiting only temporary staff of proven skills and by encouraging permanent staff to avail themselves of existing training opportunities to enhance their proficiency. All complaints are traced and supervisors monitor performance to make sure that standards are being met.

10. However, if at any given time the need for temporary assistance increases beyond certain levels, wider recruitment of freelance staff has to be undertaken and it might happen that resort has to be had to interpreters who are less experienced in the work of the Organization. In addition, unforeseen fluctuations in demand may require recruitment of temporary staff at very short notice. The most skilled language professionals, who usually make commitments well in advance of actual dates of service, are not likely to be available in such cases.

11. Longer-term recruitment of a larger number of temporary interpreters could increase servicing capacity and possibly ensure quality at the same time, but this would entail a higher risk of wasting resources. Here, the need to make sure that all service entitlements can be met has to be balanced responsibly with managerial concerns about optimizing cost-efficiency.

12. Occasionally, interpretation services have been unavailable for meetings of bodies that meet as required, that is, that do not hold scheduled sessions, and of regional groups and other major groupings of Member States. In the case of the former, the usual effect is that the body concerned must meet on a date or at a time different from that originally requested.

13. A report on the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States is before the General Assembly in the report of the Secretary-General of 6 August 1999 (A/54/208). As reported therein, although the number of requests for services for such meetings rose sharply between 1996 and 1999 (from 125 in the period from July 1996 to June 1997 to 314 from June 1998 to July 1999), the percentage of meetings for which interpretation could not be provided dropped from 32 to 16.6 over the same period.

14. While further improvements could be achieved through more advanced planning of the work programmes of calendar bodies and more flexibility in the scheduling of the meetings concerned, only an increase in interpretation capacity, presumably achieved with higher levels of temporary assistance, would increase the likelihood that requests for services for such meetings could be met. However, current legislation on the matter, reaffirmed most recently by the General Assembly in its resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, requires that interpretation services be provided to those meetings "on an ad hoc basis, in accordance with established practice" (para. 28), that is, with capacity freed by cancellations of meetings of calendar bodies, rather than with resources specifically allocated for the purpose.

15. Efforts to maintain or enhance the quality of translated documents and publications have been ongoing for some time and include the close monitoring of self-revision rates where they have been excessive; careful selection of material to be translated contractually and a strengthening of the quality controls applied to contractual translation; increased training opportunities for translation staff; and the introduction in 1999 of computer assisted translation. While additional staffing in the translation services might make it easier for them to reduce self-revision and to devote more time to each individual text, the possibilities here are constrained by the limited pool of experienced freelance translators and, again, by concerns about maintaining appropriate productivity levels.

16. It may be relevant to mention here that both the interpretation and the translation services have been affected in their efforts to ensure quality and capacity by the restrictions imposed by the General Assembly in its decision 51/408 of 4 November 1996 on the temporary recruitment of retirees, since retired language staff are the best source of qualified and experienced temporary assistance for those services.

17. As regards the delayed issuance of documents, it has been pointed out frequently that the main cause of the situation is the late submission of material by author units to the processing services. Some progress has been made in this area through the designation of departmental focal points for documentation and improved coordination at the

initial stages of document production. As a result, the delivery of documents for the General Assembly was slightly better in 1999 than in 1998. Nevertheless, by 31 July — the date by which, according to the six-week rule, all pre-session documents for the fifty-fourth session should have been issued — only 27 per cent of the documentation had been submitted for processing.

18. Theoretically, if late submission were accepted as inevitable and the onus for timely circulation were shifted entirely to the processing services, the problem could be addressed by increasing the capacity of the editorial, translation, text-processing, reproduction and distribution services through the addition of more temporary staff at peak periods. However, current rules on submission and issuance of documentation preclude such an approach.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 7* (A/54/7).

[2] Ibid., *Supplement No. 6* (A/54/6/Rev.1).

[3] Ibid., *Supplement No. 7* (A/54/7), chap. II, para. I.40.